

E3 2002: All About Xbox Live

Full blowout on Microsoft's online service including price, launch titles and more.

by IGN Staff

May 20, 2002 - The driving force behind Xbox Live, the online gaming service by Microsoft unveiled at the company's E3 Press Conference, is getting gamers online as quickly and easily as possible. For an initial price of \$49.99 this fall, gamers can purchase an Xbox Live Starter Kit, a pack that comes loaded with the Xbox Voice Communicator peripheral and a disc of Xbox Live software that will bring all of the online gaming hardware already built into the Xbox screaming to life. That \$50 will get you 12 months of service, but Microsoft hasn't announced any renewal plans beyond the first year. But the company internally is close to maintaining a \$9.95 per month value for the service. The potential for all kinds of soft bundles and other subscription packages with broadband service providers is tremendous, but Microsoft has held back on any such announcements. Xbox General Manager J Allard stopped short of picking a specific launch date for Xbox Live, instead opting for the solidly vague "Fall" window as the arrival time for XBL.

One solid piece of information that gamers can look forward to was the list of first party Xbox Live launch titles they'll have whenever that "Fall" launch rolls around:

- Unreal Championship
- Phantasy Star Online
- NFL Fever 2003
- MechAssault
- Whacked!
- Midtown Madness 3

Microsoft is counting on many more Xbox Live titles from third party companies during the launch window of the service, this distinguished list includes:

- ToeJam & Earl 3: All Funked Up
- Ghost Recon
- Shayde: Monsters vs. Humans
- NFL 2K3
- Rayman Arena
- Armada 2
- NCAA College Basketball 2K3
- Rainbow Six: Ravens Shield
- Tetris Worlds
- Timesplitters 2
- Lamborghini
- MX Superfly
- XIII
- NBA 2K3
- Counter-Strike
- Star Wars Galaxies

The list of Xbox Live titles expands to include new online versions of previously released games including Halo, Project Gotham, Amped and Railisport Challenge. These games are still being referred to by the original names but will be reworked in some way to include an online component of one kind or another.

How it will work

Simplicity is the key to Xbox Live. Microsoft is building the entire infrastructure for its online network from scratch to make sure it has the security, reliability and functionality that the Xbox's forefathers envisioned when the system was built. Allard estimated that MS spent roughly \$50 per console on hardware and pre-programming that will be used for Xbox Live. That is, every gamer out there with an Xbox is already holding all of the technology necessary for online gaming, it's just remained dormant all this time.

The Xbox Live Starter Kit disc will come with software that will activate all of those high tech innards of the Xbox in addition to taking user information such as credit card info, demographic data and the all important user ID. You'll need to have an active, paid for broadband account with some provider before launching Xbox Live since all of the registration is done online. Your user ID will be stuck with you and your account for life so choose your name wisely. You choose your password by hitting button pushes and trigger pulls on your Xbox controller. This is just one part of the "military grade" security Xbox Live is incorporating. Once your credit card info has been transmitted and charged and your account is activated, your user ID is locked onto the Xbox that created it and it can only be activated by the user and his or her unique password combo. The only way you can go on Xbox Live from another Xbox is by way of (drumroll please) the memory unit. The 8MB memory unit can save your Xbox Live user ID so that you can transport it to a friend's house for a little online double teaming.

In addition to a single unique user ID, which allows for ultra secure gaming, playing an Xbox Live game will have another important defining feature. There will be no keyboard and every single Xbox Live game, every title mentioned above, will have voice communication capabilities by definition. The Voice Communicator fits in the top slot on the Xbox controller, and in the top slot only. The sound processing is clear enough to compare favorably to the sound you might hear on mobile phone using a hands free set. Only voices of other players can be heard over the headset, all in-game music and sound effects will still come from whatever speakers you happen to be using.

In Microsoft's efforts to create a "global couch" making new friends, finding the ones you have and interacting with them is a huge focus for Xbox Live. Matchmaking comes in two varieties. Opti-Match helps you find people of your same skill level, playing the same game as you and on a connection that's suitable for steady game play. The concept of gamers balancing ping and pushing the limits of fluidity is supposed to go out the window with Xbox Live. In theory, when gamers are looking for new opponents online, they won't even see, and hence won't have to be bothered with, gamers who have too much lag for a smooth gaming experience. Quick Match is the opposite, it simply brings up the first online gaming server with an available opening as soon as you've finished selecting your character, team or car and if you say "yes" away you go.

Your user ID also tracks your stats in your games and can be expanded to include your gaming profile so that your favorite team or car or character will automatically be selected when you power up an Xbox Live game and logon. The stat tracking should be implemented at launch and will be a key factor in matchmaking. If you're a veteran Ghost Recon player with hundreds of kills under your belt, you simply won't be able to invade a game with a bunch of newbies with the idea of slaughtering at will to boost your stats even more. Your Ghost Recon gaming data is stored on your user ID on your Xbox which is read by the gaming server at the Xbox Live data center when you log on so you can't "fake" it and pretend you're a suchy player. If you're going to be attacking games full of newbies or if you're a rookie trying to hang with veterans it will have to be done via the buddy list. Meaning you'll have to make friends with a bunch of people out of your league and convince them to let you into their game. Fat chance of that happening.

Friend tracking is the other half of creating that online community. This will function more or less like an instant messenger buddy list so that you'll instantly be able to see that your friends are online and what game they're playing. You'll be able to send them an instant message for the purposes of inviting them to play a game. Your friend then has the option of replying positively to your message in which case he or she has to pop out whatever disc he or she is playing and put in the disc of the game that you're playing. Or you can simply tell your buddy to buzz off. The magic is that this is one area out of many where the Xbox Live team has set up things nice and stable the way the company wanted, but game developers will still have the freedom to implement their creativity in key areas. That is a game maker can do some creative things with the whole buddy tracking/interaction system so that rather than simply sending messages and responses, the player might be able to do something in the game that he's playing like call a timeout in a sports game or shoot a flare in an action game as a way of responding to their buddy's request for a game.

Developers will determine just how massively multiplayer their Xbox Live titles will be. The gaming servers are all controlled by Microsoft (and to some degree Sega with their crop of XBL games), so that the game creators simply have to request the bandwidth they'll need to get the desired result. NFL Fever can only support eight players on two Xboxes at the maximum and only when they're going to head to head. That is you in St. Louis can team up with your buddy in San Antonio to take on some schmuck in Santa Fe. If you and your friend want to beat up on Santa Fe, one of you is going to have to hop on a plane because cooperative gameplay in Fever can only be done with 1-4 players on one Xbox and opponent(s) on another. A game like Unreal Championship is going to have an entirely different set of rules and parameters as determined by the nature of online first person shooters.

Content downloading is another significant advantage of Xbox Live. The ever mercurial dream of downloadable content will in fact become a reality with XBL. The tentative plan for ToeJam & Earl 3 is to introduce new content to the game over time. In theory this increases the value of the game and more or less gets new content to gamers much quicker rather than relying on the established cycle of sequels. Of course this also opens up all kinds of potential pricing options for publishers. Not only can they sell downloadable stuff for, say, \$9.95 a pop, but what about sponsorship deals that will give you new Taco Bell sponsored skate park Tony Hawk was skating through on the X Games last week? The possibilities are endless.

With Microsoft assuming all of the responsibilities and costs for online gaming (and thus the overwhelming share of the profits if this thing takes off) game publishers are supposed to free to focus on the creative side of online gaming. Big companies still reserve the right to charge for access fees, on whatever kind of plan they want, for their games which would be in addition to the cost of signing up for Xbox Live.

The Xbox Live Starter Kit disc will come with an online capable version of Acclaim's Re-Volt so gamers will have something to play right away if they don't have the scratch to pick up a \$50 Xbox Live game like NFL Fever 2003.

Xbox Live's greatest strength may be its money making and money saving methods for all parties involved. Publisher and developers are freed from the burden of setting up, maintaining and securing gaming servers and accounts, yet they can still get in on the online gaming market enjoyed by PC-centric companies. Retailers are always happy to have new products to sell and Xbox Live should provide them with new hardware (the Starter Kit) and services (broadband service brokers). And finally, online gaming could be the application that broadband service providers have been waiting for to push their product to mainstream consumers.

IGN will have more on Xbox Live because it could very well be the all-encompassing future of gaming.

